

This essay explores the banal as a contemporary photographic aesthetic, examining banality in relation to notions of boredom and *ennui*. The “perceptual boredom” of the banal image—its resistance to emotional and critical engagement—is considered in relation to its content, style, and spatial structure.

## Boredom, Repetition, Inertia: Contemporary Photography and the Aesthetics of the Banal

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In her classic text *On Photography*, Susan Sontag claims that photographic seeing has to be “constantly renewed with new shocks, whether of subject matter or technique, so as to produce the impression of violating ordinary vision” (31). For Sontag, photography represents a kind of “extraordinary vision,” a perception that continues to inform a great deal of photographic criticism. The past decade, however, has seen the emergence of a different kind of photographic aesthetic. In the words of Neville Wakefield:

Bad photography now reigns. [...] It makes for good art at a time when good photography witnesses only the flow of technical virtuosity into addictive banality. With the demise of photographic authority, the former province of “photography” with its silver gelatin bureaucrats and legislative decrees has become something much more like a republic of photographic practice. [...] Artists deliberately flout photographic convention to [...] practice without a license. (239)

The work I will be examining here reflects a more prosaic approach to photographic seeing—a fascination with the everyday, a preoccupation with the vernacular, an “ordinary,” rather than an “extraordinary” vision. Rather than simply dismissing this as “bad photography,” however, I would like to examine the banal as an *aesthetic category*, as a motif and a mode of reception, and to look critically at the embodiment of the ordinary that lies at its heart.

Photography’s fascination with the ordinary is nothing new, but the crystallization of this fascination into a curatorial and editorial aesthetic is a relatively recent development. Such recent exhibitions as *Reality Check* at the Photographer’s Gallery and *Cruel and Tender* at the Tate Modern introduce to a larger public a number of aesthetic preoccupations that have been visible in exhibition practice for the past decade. Grounded in the allied motifs of boredom, repetition, and inertia, these concerns are also evident in current critical writing on photography. “Banality” and “the banal” show up frequently in accounts of the work of Thomas Ruff, Martin Parr, Richard Billingham, and others; they also feature thematically in the retrospective attention paid to photographers like Robert Adams, William Eggleston, and Stephen Shore. Fashion and advertising have been quick to take up the mass appeal of the banal image (it surfaces in the “snapshot aesthetic” of photographers like Terry Richardson and Jurgен Teller), and to push its boundaries; arguably, heroin chic was born out of the morbid allure of drug culture as seen through the eyes of photographers like Corrine Day, Davide Sorrenti, and Nan Goldin.

“Banality” and “the banal” are not easy terms to pin down with precision, and it is unlikely that there is any advantage to be gained in doing so. Although the term *banal* can be used to categorize a broad selection of work, it is not intended here as a totalizing description, nor as a pretext for eliding other important concerns—political, aesthetic, or otherwise—in the work of individual photographers. As Meaghan Morris points out, however, banality is part of the modern history of taste, and generally indicates a negative value judgement (12). Banality, she claims, is a sensibility intrinsic to modernity; certainly the history of photography is littered with comments on the banality of photographic images, most of them intended in a pejorative sense. As an aesthetic category, however, and as a means of challenging the prejudicial bias that still characterizes the term, banality, as I understand it, suggests something more specific to postmodernity and to contemporary photographic practice.

In common parlance, an aesthetic is frequently used to indicate a theme or motif uniting a group of works. Though this definition lacks theoretical precision, it is a useful starting point for unpacking the notion of the banal on the level of signification.

Banality is a problem of late capitalism, a creation of macroeconomics, and an effect of material culture. Closely bound up with notions of boredom and *ennui*, the banal is a kind of shorthand for those routines and value systems of high capitalism that are as annoying and trivial as they are obligatory. As a photographic aesthetic or style, banality could be described as a kind of postindustrial realism, a turn away from the spectacular and an often pitiless focus on its antithesis. It pans out in images as an obsession with the mundane facts of life under Western capitalism and the bland, omnipresent world of commodity culture. This is no dream world infused with myth, however, where the trivial becomes an object of reverence, but a world of unrelenting monotony, where the everyday is rarely allowed to rise above its own insignificance. Banality, as Goldstein remarks, is “the antithesis of originality” (82); as a photographic aesthetic, it is less about the transformation of the everyday into the fantastic than it is about its ordinary re-presentation.

This ordinariness is part of the way that the banal is manifested on the level of reception. Banality is linked, as I will show, to the conventions of vernacular photography—the throwaway aesthetic of the snapshot, the bland familiarity of the photo-booth portrait or the passport photograph—and to the “visual economy of repetition” (Petro 83) that characterizes these types of images. Here, as I will argue, our cultural over-familiarity with certain kinds of images acts as a deterrent to critical engagement, and banality, as a mode of response, takes on the shadings of indifference and frustrated desire. Banality, according to Petro, is “about both too much and too little, sensory overload and sensory deprivation, anxieties of excess as well as anxieties of loss” (81). All of these extremes are actualized in the banal image, in its resistance to engagement, and in its insistent presence as an ordinary thing, a piece of consumer ephemera.

As a philosophical category, aesthetics was originally conceived as a way of dealing with the domain of sensuous experience, that unstable mediatory category between the corporeal realm of the body and the abstract domain of the mind. Aesthetics is a matter not simply of content but of *presentation*, and, as such, it has more complex phenomenological connotations. The final sections of this paper will focus on the specifics of the event of seeing and on the nature of viewer’s encounter with the image. When judging an image in terms of our *experience* of it, “banal” and “banality” usually indicate work that is in some way unengaging. Taking this refusal as a starting point, I will examine banality as a particular attitude towards a photographic image, a type of aesthetic effect.

The affinity for the superficial that marks the banal image on the level of content is reduplicated on the level of experience, in the refusal of the image to acknowledge the mobility of the viewer’s gaze. This frustration of the look can be understood in

phenomenological terms as a kind of “perceptual boredom.” The latter is an effect specific to the perspectival image, the consequence of a particular use or manipulation of photographic space. The static, “depthless” space of the banal image assumes a viewing body bereft of sensual pleasure, and acts to suppress the *affective*—and potentially political—dimensions of the viewer’s encounter with the image.

**A**s a literary theme, boredom dates back to Greek and Roman times, but its recent history is intricately bound up with that of the modern subject. In the West, boredom entered the popular imagination in the latter years of the nineteenth century, the newfound affliction of a burgeoning middle class that found itself with too much spare time on its hands. In nineteenth-century discourse, boredom referred to the “unbearable experience of being in the everyday.” By the early twentieth century, psychoanalytic discourse had allied boredom with depression, anger, and the possibility of clinical release from these symptoms, while critical theory understood it “in relation to leisure, and also to waiting, to an expectation or future orientation of subjectivity devoid of anxiety or alienation” (Petro 81). In both cases, boredom (or *désœuvrement*) is a temporal concern; a forced inactivity of mind; a temporary slowdown of the normal flow of perception. We experience this kind of boredom standing in a queue, waiting for a train, dealing with the tedious imperatives of modern life. Boredom of this nature is an effect of external circumstances, and normally goes away when these circumstances change.

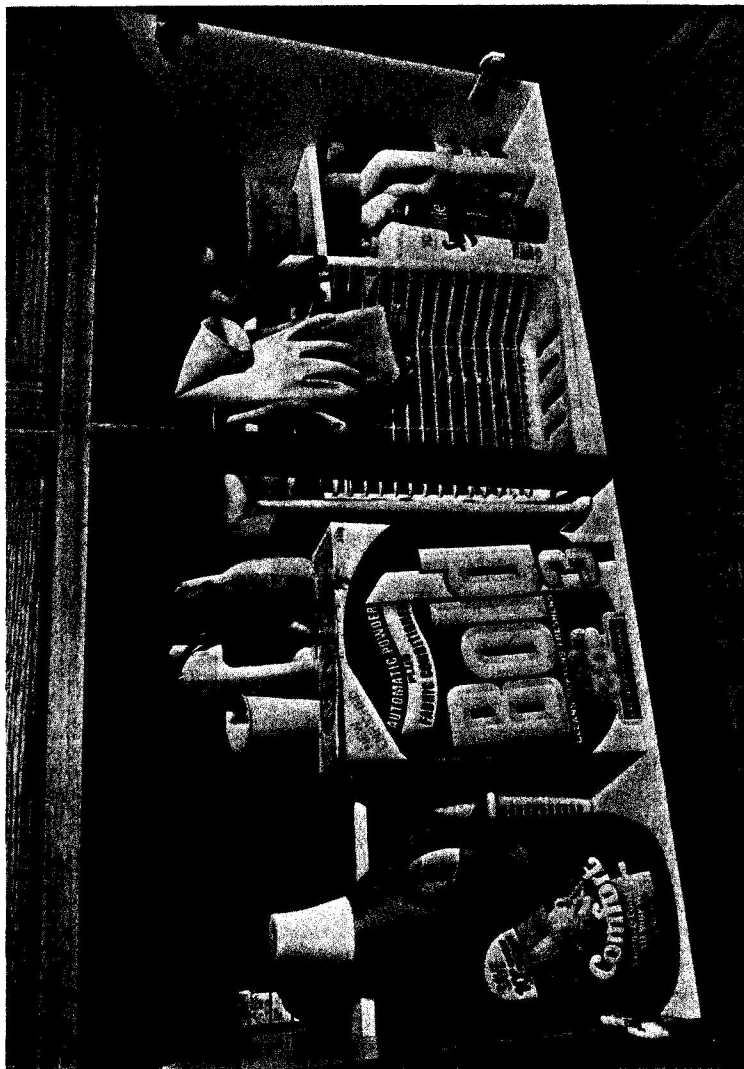
*Ennui*, on the other hand, is a more complex existential condition. The term stems from the Latin *odium*, to hate, but from the early middle ages, *ennui* has had two essentially contradictory meanings. On the one hand, as Kuhn relates, “it designated something, often of a petty nature, that proved vexatious and irritating. [...] On the other hand [...] the word ‘enui’ is used to designate a profound sorrow” (5–6). *Ennui* combines trifling irritation with deeper spiritual distress, and, unlike boredom, it is not necessarily linked to external circumstance. It is an ongoing, chronic condition, attacking body and soul; it is the “stare of emptiness that the soul feels when it is deprived of interest in action, life, and the world [...]” (Kuhn 13).

Time moves slowly for those in the grip of boredom or *ennui*, and this torpor is part of the vocabulary of the banal. In the work of Sarah Jones and Hannah Starkey, apathetic teenagers, usually girls, languish, slack-limbed and expressionless, in dimly-lit cafés, nondescript interiors, and anonymous shopping malls. The cheerless Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS) waiting rooms depicted in Paul Graham’s *Beyond Caring* series (1985) present boredom as the inevitable consequence of a hopelessly overextended social welfare system, while Corinne Day’s *Diary* (2000) frames *ennui* as both the incentive and the effect of alternative lifestyle choices. In these images and others like them, individuals stand apart from the world, separated from it by a

screen of indifference. It is not that they actively refuse to invest in their surroundings; they simply do not have the energy. There is nothing decisive about the moments shown in these images. Instead, they capture *indecisive* moments, identical in their monotony to those that came before and those that will likely follow. Here, the photograph functions not as a register of the extraordinary, but as the index of a chronic and invariant condition.

It is clear that there is a good deal of room for semantic slippage between “boredom,” “*ennui*,” and “banality,” and it will be difficult to avoid reproducing this imprecision at some points in the following discussion. All three terms are historically specific, however, and there are important distinctions between them. Boredom and *ennui* are emblems of early modernity, born out of shifting labour patterns and the novelty of unfilled time. Banality proper is a creature of late- and postmodernity, a feature of a late capitalist culture where empty moments are no longer a novelty, but a void to be filled. Banality and the banal are descriptive of the ways we fill this time, and of the objects with which we fill it. To borrow Rick Poynor’s fluent idiom, boredom is the “existential corollary of excess” (22). It engulfs the subject in a world that has lost its meaning, and this loss is both a spiritual and a phenomenological one. If boredom and *ennui* represent the exhaustion of the soul, a private concern, then banality is the tangible, communal substrate of this exhaustion: where *ennui* is about too much time, banality is about *too much stuff*.

As a cultural condition, banality is bound up with the material processes of commodity production. Home appliances, commuting, frozen dinners: necessities of modern life, these things also embody a kind of vacancy in the phenomenological register. Banal objects lack anima. Most of the time, we do not even register them; they hold our attention only when their presence or absence becomes vexatious. These sorts of mundane objects show up again and again in recent photography—in images by David Bate (his *Zone* series, 2002), Nigel Shafran (his *Washing Up*, series, 2000), John R. Taylor, Wolfgang Tillmans, and many others—and our relation to them is one of habit. It is tempting to think of the banal along the same lines as kitsch. Like Greenberg’s nemesis, the banal is “mechanical and operates by formula”; it is the “epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times”. Unlike kitsch, however, the banal does not aspire to the status of “ersatz culture” (Greenberg 10). Lacking the ambition and the brazen, seedy sensuality of kitsch, the banal does not even register on the cultural scale. It is embedded in material culture, but its proper domain is that of the *unconsidered*. Banality goes hand in hand with superabundance and mindless consumption, with things and obligations so fixed in necessity that their presence has become anaesthetic. Numbing the senses and paralyzing the imagination, banality is the cut-price plastic materialization of the “crisis in perception” that marked the dawn of



1. John Taylor, *Beld 3*, 1989 (courtesy of John Taylor).

Though banality is grounded in material culture, it cannot be reduced to objects per se. It is more useful to think of it as a feature of postmodern life, a consequence of all the rituals and transactions that have grown up around stuff—locating it, paying for it, moving it around, showing it off, breaking it, getting rid of it. The archetypes of banality, as Goldstein points out, are forged in the “disposable venues” of postindustrial culture (81); they are born in shopping malls, dollar stores, and mail-order catalogues, and feed on an endless cycle of unfulfilled and unfulfillable desire.

In images, banality is often signified as a marriage of material excess and spiritual destitution. It is epitomized in the work of Martin Parr. His images speak not of the heroism of daily life, but of its banality, the “boredom of plenty.” They are filled with nameless, ubiquitous reminders of consumer excess—“synthetic, garish, glutinous, purulent, obscene”—and peopled with the casualties of advanced capitalism (Poynor 18–20). Adrift in a sea of abundance, Parr’s subjects play out their various routines and obligations with a pliant indolence that often borders on desperation (see Plate 9 in colour section). Hannah Starkey’s work is filled with a similar ambience: in one image (*Untitled*, October 1998), a young woman regards herself spiritlessly in a changing-room mirror, wearied by the uniformity of the garment she is trying, or by the empty ritual of purchasing it, or maybe both. Bored with life, bored with things, these subjects hold on tightly to “the pretence of aesthetic experience [...] [living] an artificially extended existence that has lost its dignity” (Masterson 57). In Lesley Shearer’s *Women and Men* series (1998), intimate relationships take on the quotidian status of the environments in which they are set; here, even human emotions disappear below the horizon of the commonplace.

Of course, this is not the first time that photography has engaged the domain of the everyday: Paul Strand, Edward Steichen, and Edward Weston are among those who shared photographic modernism’s fascination with mass produced objects. Pop art’s fascination with the banal was equally sanguine and ostensibly more accessible; more recently, artists like Jeff Koons have adopted banality as leitmotif of post-modernity. There is an upbeat excitement in Pop that is missing in the postmillennial banal, though, and it generally lacks the satirical edge of Koons, who eulogizes banality in such elaborate fashion that it no longer warrants the label.

Parr’s work has been criticized as “gratuitous and cruel,” and he has been condemned for his tendency to collapse the everyday into the object: “Where a photographer like Cartier-Bresson instinctively sought the good in people, producing dignified, celebratory images of everyday life, Parr rubs the viewer’s nose in squalor, tackiness, affectation and monotony” (Poynor 17). There is an undeniable cynicism in Parr’s vision, an inclination to frame the banality of everyday life as a combination of boredom

and powerlessness. A similar sensibility, coloured with the pathos of disappointed longing, pervades Rineke Dijkstra's portraits of young clubbers (*Buzz Club, Liverpool*, 1995), and images like Bertien van Manen's *Dancing Couples, Grooves' Bar, Shanghai*, 2001. Here, banality transcends its customary demographic, the middle aged suburbanite, and shows itself as an affliction of urban youth culture as well. These images foreground the totalitarian quality and sense of oppression that characterize late capitalist culture; they show a civilization in a state of economic and spiritual decline, and a newly underemployed middle class who are "not only earning less than their parents, but having less of a good time." (Masterson 57).

Despite this, there is a kind of comfort in the banal, a strange serenity in the denial of individuality that it connotes: "When objects radiate—or when people project—banality, we can feel reassured. It's some sort of sublime comfort to lull in the divestiture of distinction they provide" (Goldstein 81). Rather than a threat to the subject, banality acts as a shield; it mitigates against the trauma of everyday life. Like neurasthenia, it brings about a "disintegration of the capacity for experience" (Buck-Morss 19). Here, however, this dysfunction is not simply a reaction, a compensatory response to sensory overstimulation, but an imperceptible degeneration, a painless slide into a state of "luminescent emptiness," a way of making tolerable the soul-destroying uniformity of life under late capitalism. Particularly in Day's work, *ennui* is worn like an emblem of rebellion, and the daily round of life consists of little more than the replacement of one form of mental inertia with another (*Ted at Home* [1995]; *Tim and Tara at Home, Stoke Newington* [1999]). Oblivious and untouchable, Day's subjects advocate a politics of glassy-eyed refusal; here, anti-capitalist insurrection takes the paralytic form of doing nothing at all.

**B**anality, argues Richard Goldstein, has its aesthetic roots in advertising (77). For the most part, however, the banal image lacks the spectacularity, or at least the aspirations to spectacularity, that distinguishes conventional advertising imagery. Though it may be responsible for popularizing this aesthetic, I would suggest that the roots of the banal sensibility lie less with advertising than they do with vernacular photography.

Vernacular images, broadly speaking, are those that "preoccupy home and heart but rarely the museum or the academy" (Batchen, "Vernacular Photographies" 262). Craig Owens has suggested that vernacular photographies (the plural is intentional; there are many different genera within this classification) constitute art photography's *parergon*—that category of images which determines what art photography is *not* (in Batchen, "Responses to a Questionnaire" 262). Taken most often, but not exclusively,

by amateur photographers, vernacular photographs are not generally intended for public display. Rather, they are produced and consumed as part of a prescribed set of social activities, and come with their own set of aesthetic standards. In part, these standards are grounded in the legibility of the image. Keeping still, holding the camera straight, keeping one's finger away from the lens, photographing in adequate lighting conditions, etc.—all of these "encompass an aesthetic which must be recognized and admitted so that transgression of its imperative appears as a failure" (Bourdieu 165).

Social function also plays a role in defining what Bourdieu characterizes as the "mass aesthetic" of vernacular imagery. In many cases, the full significance of such images is limited to those who understand their context. Personal photographs, for example, "expect to be understood within an interpretive community, a group of users who share the same understandings of pictures which record and confirm valued rites of passage and culturally significant moments" (Holland 153). Other types of vernacular imagery, such as passport photographs, serve a more civic function. Both roles presuppose a more or less uncritical acceptance of the photograph as a "message without a code," and both types of images share a kind of manifest explicitness. Concerned primarily with re-presenting what was seen, as it was seen, the vast bulk of vernacular imagery deliberately avoids formal experimentation or aesthetic novelty. Instead, it objectifies what Petro has termed a "visual economy of repetition" (83)—the perceptual boredom of the *already seen*.

Thomas Ruff's portraits mimic the deadpan style of the passport image or mug shot. Taken in a studio setting, they conform to the same invariant formula: subjects are posed from the shoulders up, against a neutral background, looking directly and expressionlessly into the camera. This stripped-down style has been widely adopted by other photographers, though they may include coloured backgrounds (Marie-Jo Lafontaine's *Pandemonium* series, 1998), or pose the subject in the street (Jitka Hanzlová's *Brixton* series, 2002; Tillmans's *Annie, Marylebone Flyover*, 1993) or in their home (Tillmans's *Alex in Her Room*, 1993; *Julia*, 1991). Even in the latter two strategies, however, the subject's surroundings seldom succeed in transcending the anonymity of the studio background, and one gets the impression that they are not meant to. A subtly different visual economy of repetition is at work in the "snapshot" aesthetic, in the apparently ingenuous vision of photographers like Goldin, Day, Teller, and Billingham. Technically undistinguished, their work situates itself in the domain of the vernacular by assuming the mediocrity, and the ersatz neutrality, of the *underachieved* image. Here, the banal manifests itself as an "aesthetics of disappointment" (Wakefield 244); it is embodied in the very unremarkableness of these images, and in the fact that they fail, for the most part, to fulfill the social functions they suggest. Ruff's images may

look like passport photos, but they deliberately reveal very little about the sitter's identity. Billingham, Day, and Goldin invite the viewer into their world not as a participant, but as a voyeur; there is a stubborn opacity to their images that even the seeming intimacy of first-name titles like Day's *Tara at Home*, 1994, or Goldin's *Gina at Bruce's Dinner Party*, 1991, cannot overcome (see Plate 10 in colour section).

Banality is characterized by "an enigmatic surface, a willed simplicity that generates contemplation of emptiness" (Goldstein 81)—a kind of *ennui* of vision. Certainly, the calculated informality of the vernacular style seems to willfully resist critical engagement or closure. This fondness for the vacuous has also been evident in recent design and advertising as a trend for visually impoverished images "which [appear] to lack any semblance of an interior life" (Poynor 79). For Gavin Murphy, this unwillingness or inability to stimulate critical thought cuts right to the heart of the aesthetics of the banal (3). In some cases, this refusal is quite deliberate: Ruff, for instance, goes to considerable lengths to assure that his portraits have as little psychological depth as possible. Teller submerges his celebrity subjects in willfully mundane environments and situations (*Stephanie in Playroom*, Connecticut, 1999, and *O.J. Simpson*, Miami, 2000); other images are filled with stock poses and amateurish mistakes (Teller's *Lola and Snow White*, Disneyland, 2000; *Day's Canned Beach*, 1994). Whether it is articulated through shoddiness of technique or in the studied superficiality of subject matter, this refusal often translates into a tendency of the surface of the image to preside over its content in a kind of self-obsession that discourages the viewer from moving beyond the glossy skin of the print. In the case of *Reality Check*, this shallowness became the subject of the exhibition itself. Though it claimed to assert "the potency of the world as a subject for photography while simultaneously exploring the medium's potential" (Bush 4), *Reality Check* seldom moved beyond the narcissism of the self-consciously "photographic."

At its inception and throughout its early years, photography was understood as an instrument of transformation, a democratizing tool that conferred notability on whatever it recorded, transfiguring substance into image. This is not the case in the work discussed here, which seems, perversely, to work against photography's transformative potential. Rather than raising the status of the objects they depict, the images themselves aspire to the status of objects. Batchen points out that vernacular photography depends upon the presence of the image as an *artifact*; as something that has "volume, opacity, tactility and a physical presence in the world" ("Vernacular Photographies" 263). Here, however, this tendency is pushed to its logical limit. Refusing the transcendence of the pure image, the banal photograph instead embraces its position as an undifferentiated consumer object. Without the gallery wall to support it, the banal image risks disappearing into the ranks of the same commodities whose very mundanity it mocks.

The fact that the banal image points towards its own status as object suggests that the aesthetics of the banal be approached not just in terms of *what* we read in the image, but of *how* we read it. The following section will re-examine the theme of superficiality, but here, my concern will shift from the question of representation to the act of reading itself—to the nature of the aesthetic encounter, the way that the image operates, and the kind of *affective response* it produces in the viewer.

Affective response is difficult to describe or quantify. In part, it refers to the variety of emotions that are stirred up when we experience an artwork, emotions which are not always easy to put into words. This inarticulacy or "muteness," and the possibility of finding the means to describe it with language, is the motivation behind Peter De Bolla's investigation of affect in his *Art Matters*. Brian Massumi is equally fascinated by the difficulty of finding a cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect, defining the latter in terms of the subject's transitional power, its potential to exceed or "perform its way out of" pre-existing cultural codes. This potential, he argues, is grounded in the body, and contingent upon the extra-discursive or unassimilable character of affective response (3).

Both of these approaches, nonetheless, suggest that the affective dimension of an aesthetic encounter is, in part, a function of an individual's material encounter with an object, and it is the mutuality or reflexivity of this exchange that interests me here. More specifically, I am concerned with the kind of look that the banal image anticipates—its presence and presentation as something "to be looked at"—and with the lexicon of feeling that this opens up. In the case of the banal image, this lexicon would appear to be a fairly limited one. This limitation arises not because we lack the means to describe the experience, but quite simply because we do not feel compelled to do so, and this reluctance is something that the banal image seems to call for. Faced with banality, we are asked to do nothing. The perceptual boredom of the "already seen" is played out on the level of the encounter with the image, and here it is a function of a specific treatment of photographic space.

The vernacular dimension of banality suggests a specific, and highly conventionalized, way of understanding the space of the photographic image. Pierre Bourdieu has suggested that the protocols of linear perspective function as a sort of "canonical aesthetic" within vernacular photography (163). A Renaissance "discovery" that has attained paradigmatic status in Western culture, linear perspective continues to shape thought and perception, remaining "resolutely unembarrassed [...] by being declared obsolete" (Damisch xx). Charged with the illusory qualities of truth and objectivity, our predisposition to read photographic images according to this system has granted linear perspective the status of a "social definition of an objective vision of the world" (Bourdieu 164).

Reading a perspectival image nonetheless involves a certain investment of the self in its virtual space. Using the example of history painting, Louis Marin shows how iconic propositions in the image are converted into narrative ones as a result of specific operations involved in the contemplative process. The archetypal narratives communicated in history painting are of course nothing like the more open-ended themes in the images presently under discussion. Although historical paintings and contemporary photographs involve different kinds of competence in deciphering their meaning, I would like to suggest that both entail a similar kind of "performance" on a structural level. The "act of reading" involves more than just unpacking an image semiotically in order to identify its content. It is also an embodied encounter, and as such it comprises particular effects—*affective responses* or *intensities*—that language cannot properly describe. Intensity or affect is embodied not in conscious thought, but in autonomic reactions, "outside expectation and adaptation, as disconnected from meaningful sequencing [and] narration as it is from vital function" (Massumi 24–5).

Though it is commonly held that images constructed in perspective assume a static, monocular gaze, such images are in fact designed for an *active* look. The narrative propositions of an image are staged within its illusory three-dimensional space. It is here that the temporal diachronic sequences of the story are displaced onto the synchronic "atemporal" order of representation, distributed around a "central represented moment" which it is the viewer's task to unpack. The latter displacement is, as Marin remarks, a structural one, involving the "lateralization" of the dimension of pictorial depth: the perspectival structure of the image enables the conversion of the image's iconic propositions into narrative ones by inviting the eye to move sequentially "into" the image from foreground to horizon. The perspectival image opens up a "path of reading" for the subject, and in this sense, it functions as "a metaphor of the formal apparatus of enunciation" (Marin 313). As Hubert Damisch claims, the "formal apparatus put in place by the perspective paradigm is equivalent to that of the sentence, in that it assigns the subject a place within a previously established network that gives it meaning, while at the same time opening up the possibility of something like a statement." (xxi). In order to read a perspectival image, in other words, the subject must invest in it both spatially and temporally. Rather than just a two-dimensional surface, the image is encountered *in depth*, as a field of potential action, and it is this potentiality that forms the basis of affective response.

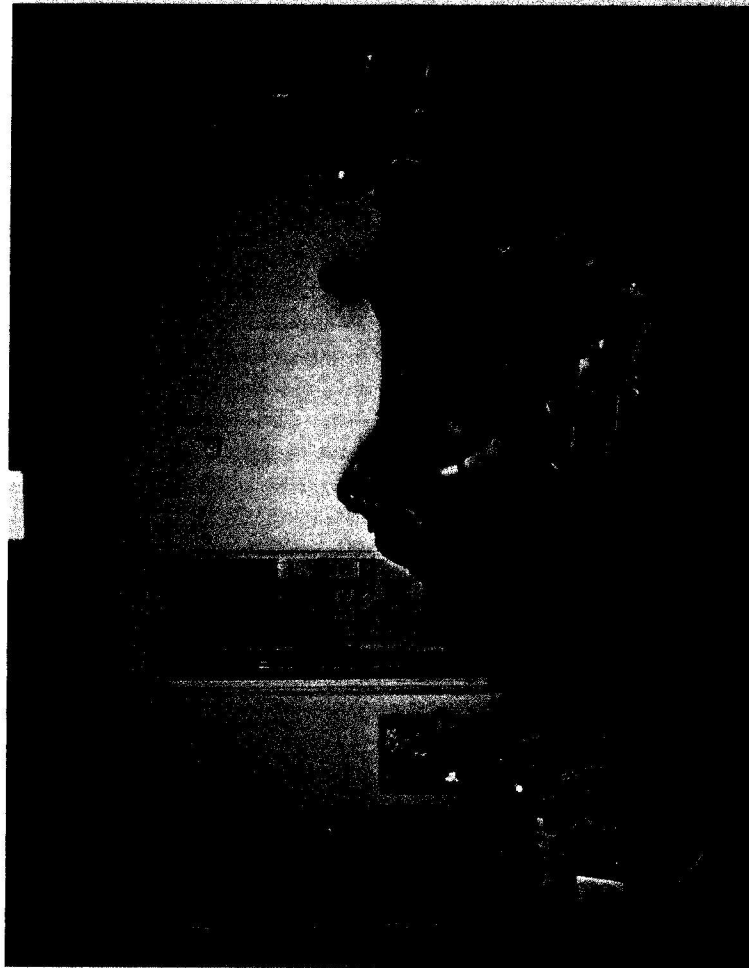
David Bate has described perceptual boredom as "a question of what one does with space." In circumstances where there is "nothing to see," he argues, "it is not that there is not anything to see, rather that the subject cannot see it. Vision is colonized, inhabited by boredom" (6). This colonization is both a spatial and a temporal con-

cern, and it shows up in literary works as well, where *ennui* is actualized in the time and space of the narrative and in the themes of enclosure and confinement (Kuhn 5). Using the example of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, Kuhn shows how *ennui* warps not just the subject's sense of time, but their sense of space as well, distorting the normal apprehension of distances and proportions (266). Faced with a banal image, the effect on the viewer/reader is similar: a kind of perceptual stasis, a frustration of the act of reading not simply on a semantic or a semiotic plane but on a structural one. This frustration is played out as a kind of "lack of depth," an obstacle in the path of reading.

It is this occlusion of space and time that lends many of Robert Adams's images their peculiarly lifeless quality. In *What We Bought: The New World* (1970–74), the stifling, characterless interiors of suburban tract homes quash the activity of the eye, leaving it to slide aimlessly across bare white walls or terminate pointlessly in empty corners. Shot in the Denver metropolitan area, the landscapes in this series invoke the same kind of perceptual inertia: rather than acting as an enticement to the look, the horizon serves only to separate a bland, undifferentiated ground plane from a similarly featureless sky. Adams pictures the American West as a field of manufactured desires, where ideals of freedom are lived out in cookie-cutter fashion in endless rows of tract housing. The two-dimensionality of the American dream is actualized in the images themselves, in the way that they confine the gaze within a narrow wedge of space and time. Lynne Cohen's interiors are equally dense in structure. Almost without exception, the images in her 1987 book *Occupied Territory* hold the eye captive in empty and indifferent institutional settings. The eerie silence of these images gives the environments the feeling of archaeological relics rather than living—or livable—spaces.

Institutional architecture lends itself well to the theme of inertia. Ori Gersht's *The Knowledge Factory* (1999–2001) depicts school buildings from the 1950s and 60s, dropped like cinderblocks into the center of the frame. Positioned purposely in the middle ground of the image, they partition the space like a wall, dividing it into two volumes—a shallow frontal space, and an expanse beyond that is left unavailable to the eye. Instead of a deep space, the viewer encounters a slippery surface, or, at best, a sort of a shadow-box. Rather than inviting the viewer to enter the virtual space and time of the image, these photographs strand them in the hopelessly truncated here and now of their encounter with the image.

This perceptual stasis is characteristic of banal space, and at times it takes on a specifically political dimension. The images in Tom Hunter's *Holly Street Tower Block Project* series (1997–98) confine the gaze within the cramped interiors of an East London council block (see Illus. 2). Made in collaboration with tenants in the months



2. Tom Hunter, No. VIII from the Holly Street Tower Block Projects Series: Residents in Cedar Court, 1997 (courtesy of Jay Jopling/White Cube [London]).

prior to the demolition of the building, these images speak simultaneously to the institutional uniformity of the interiors and to the personalities of their occupants. It was the latter that attracted Hunter, and this series was intended, in part, to comment on the determination of the tenants to create homes out of the bleak dwellings they have been allocated by a moribund social housing system. It is easy, nonetheless, to misread images like these, to see the restricted space of the image as the setting for similarly inert and overdetermined lives. Other projects tread a similarly fine line between individuality and conformity. John R. Taylor's *Ideal Home* (1989) details the minutiae of suburban life in a series of beautifully detailed yet stiflingly claustrophobic black and white images. Magda Segal's *London at Home* (1993) and *Southampton's Women* (2000) series deal with similar subject matter. For the latter project, Segal photographed the inside of her subject's homes, and of their refrigerators as well (see Illus. 3). Sparse or cluttered, squalid or spotless, both interiors speak volumes about the occupant's lives. Intentional or not, all of these projects share an ambiguity of purpose: a combined sense of intimacy, respect, and melancholia that is part of their complexity and their appeal.

In these images, late capitalist culture is set in an environment that consists of little more than depthless interiors and profoundly mundane landscapes. In all of them, photographic space is used as a way of arresting the gaze. Rather than opening up the space of the image as a field of potential action, it becomes an enclosure, a trap for the eye, a perceptual void. Georg Lukacs distinguished between "description" and "narration" in representation, and the insistence on closing down narrative pathways in the image may, as Emma Dexter argues, simply reduce it to the function of quiet description; banal images, for her, are those that simply speak "undemonstratively, not drawing attention to themselves" (16). Lucaks also claimed, however, that narrative alone was capable of encouraging empathy, and the lack of diegetic movement in these images means that their effect is profoundly anaesthetic: suppressing affective response, they threaten to lock the viewer into a specific, and ideologically expedient, way of relating to images.

**A**esthetic discourse is thoroughly bound up with ideology; it is concerned with "texturing, packaging, fetishizing, and libidinalizing" social reality, and with naturalizing or concealing the operations of power (Eagleton, "Capitalism" 93). Though it may come packaged as nothing more ominous than "bad" photography, banality as an aesthetic is born out of specific institutional processes, ideological preferences, and vested interests, and is itself implicated in the production and reproduction of ascendant discourses. Ideology, in turn, becomes aestheticized when it presents itself in the form of habit, sentiment, or affection—when dominant ideals are lived out as custom





3. Magda Segal, *Fridge*, from the series, "Southampton's Women," 2000 (courtesy of Magda Segal).

or common sense, in seeming harmony with the body's spontaneous impulses. Living out the aesthetics of the banal on the level of habit means, in other words, inscribing the body with a "subtly oppressive law" (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 21).

These images frame "ordinary" vision as bored, debilitated, and depthless. They make themselves available to an exhausted and superficial gaze, a viewer for whom looking has become little more than another consumer habit. Like any aesthetic discourse, banality is a means of habituating viewers to a particular kind of encounter with an image. On the one hand, the candor of the banal might be understood as a leveling of the playing field, a way of democratizing visual experience: Koons works the banal on this plane. On the other hand, institutionally sanctioned banality naturalizes fleeting and contentless encounters with images. This is the banal as it is embodied in the world of advertising, and it represents the commodification of culture at its most cynical. It also sanctions the sort of "love 'em and leave 'em" encounters with art that we find in the museum, where visitors are apt to spend as much time drinking coffee and contemplating prices in the gift shop as they are looking at the artworks. Disinclined to pass judgment on what they see, audiences, for their part, learn to leave such tasks to those more qualified—writers, curators, and other cultural pundits. When the temporary distraction of the active look starts to shift towards this more permanent kind of paralysis, perceptual boredom risks turning into perceptual *ennui*. Commenting on the sublime banality of photography in the age of video, David Company remarks that "in its apparent finitude and muteness, [the photograph] can leave us in permanent limbo, obliterating even the need for analysis and bolstering a kind of liberal melancholy that shuns political explanation like a vampire shuns garlic" (132). Photographic seeing is given over to the consumption of corporate kitsch, and the democratization of viewing here amounts to little more than a surrender of individual critical agency.

At the same time, however, the banal aesthetic confronts us with our own reluctance to spend time with images, and with the superficiality of our customary relationships to them. Given this, maybe the museum is not such a bad place for this sort of work. Presented in a context that traditionally requires the viewer to take a bit of time, banal images ask the viewer to redirect their focus, to think of the photographic process as well as the product. The value of bad photography, argues Wakefield, surfaces when the image itself is framed as "a way of seeing rendered as *strategy* rather than goal" (244; *emph. mine*). This goes some way to explaining the frustration of looking at an exhibition like *Reality Check*, which failed, for the most part, to engage with the performative dimensions of image making. The visually uninspiring portraits that comprise Shizuka Yokomizo's *Stranger* series (1999–2001), for example,

take on an entirely new dimension once the process behind them is foregrounded. Yokomizo wrote anonymous letters to the inhabitants of ground floor flats in a number of cities, asking them to stand in their front room at a specified time so that she could photograph them through the window. Participants were given a copy of their photograph for their efforts, but never met the photographer. Not everyone responded to her request, and the resulting images become all the more poignant when we know that their subjects represent the minority who were willing to relinquish their privacy and put their trust in the hands of an unseen stranger with a camera.

Banality can also be understood as a form of resistance to the institutionalization of photographic vision. Both Kracauer and Benjamin saw the "cultural negativity" of film and photography as means of "subverting the bourgeois cult of art and its aesthetic of illusionist absorption" (Petro 85); similarly, none of the photographers discussed here seek legitimization within the formal traditions of photography. As such, claims Wakefield, they stand a chance of retaining "a share in the public culture of [their] time" (246) and, perhaps, of engaging with the transformational power of the banal.

The emblems of banality speak volumes about the longings and desires of the postmodern subject. Disputing the politically inert critical strategies of parody and irony that characterized postmodern photographic practice, Goldstein argues for the need to confront our desires rather than ignoring them, sneering at them, or disengaging from them (81). Pop art engaged with banality in a transformative way; part of Claes Oldenberg's project, as Dick Hebdige understands it, was to "make hostile objects human." As I have argued above, the art institution can still provide the possibility for this sort of critical encounter with banality, and for the transformation of perception that it enables. Consciousness opens up alongside changes in perception, argues Goldstein, thus "banality means one thing when it is embedded in *Family Ties* and quite another when it surfaces in art. Then the sensibility of "capitalist realism" can become transcendence—which is why banality is so potentially useful as a style" (81). Aesthetic engagement with the banal, in other words, has the capacity to open up a different kind of vision, an attention to the material circumstances of looking, which might then be transformed into ethical and political action. Understood in terms of such transformational possibilities, the aesthetics of the banal has the potential to add up to more than the sum of its parts.

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